



The Role of the Horse in Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy

By Shannon Knapp

Although much is made, and should be made, of the role of humans—participants and facilitators—in the therapeutic process of equine-facilitated psychotherapy (EFP), we must not forget that the horse is still the most important part of the puzzle, and our focus should be directed toward the vital part equines play and the unique gifts they offer. To begin, let's look at how the role of the horse in an EFP session is not only significantly different from a therapeutic riding session but also remarkably different from an equine-facilitated learning (EFL) session.

In therapeutic riding or in hippotherapy, most of the time we want horses to respond to trained commands, rather than behave naturally, and offer up their unique physical gifts: gait, movement, etc. To invite the horse to act more in accordance with their instinctual nature, i.e., to behave like a prey animal while being ridden, is counter-productive to these goals.

In EFL sessions we are often in the process of teaching or moving toward some predetermined goals and/or agenda, which necessitates some level of teaching and instruction about how to engage with horses toward those goals. With that in mind, we need the horse to behave in certain ways and not in others, depending on the goals set out for the session, whether it is learning and demonstrating respect for a behaviorally challenged school group or increasing creativity and communication for a professional development group.

Biofeedback Experts

What is possible in EFP, however, is for the whole horse to be invited to the party: mentally, emotionally and

A horse is often able to “attune” or listen to us at a much different and often deeper level and hear us more clearly.

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physically. That's the rich opportunity present in EFP, in which the horse brings the unique gift of feedback by offering a clean, clear response to how humans “show up,” or interact with the horse. This gives participants an opportunity to check perceptions of themselves against the perception of others—in this case, the horse.

How is the horse able to give this very valuable feedback? Because of the way equines evolved, the horse is especially fine-tuned in his ability to read others. Key components to the horse's development that cause them to be experts in feedback are laid out in Dr. Robert Miller's *Understanding the Ancient Secrets of the Horse's Mind*, one of the most important books on horse psychology for the field of EFP. These secrets, or inherited behavioral traits, include: the instinct to flee, being perceptive and response time.

The instinctual propensity of horses to flee when uncertain offers obvious visual feedback for people. (Bear in mind that a fleeing horse during a session does not necessarily indicate something negative in a person.) This instinct goes hand in hand with the next trait: being perceptive. Horses are incredibly perceptive to the world around them, to “people, places, changes and things,” as Pat Parelli would say. Horses can offer feedback about parts of ourselves that we, with our large brains, have rationalized away, ignored or are just unable to see it. The third trait—response time—



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Oxytocin, a hormone released in all mammals in physical contact with one another, has been linked to the ability to make social connections and bond.

amplifies the first, in that rarely is a fleeing horse slow or plodding but instead responds swiftly.

Opposition Reflex

Although not mentioned by Dr. Miller, another critical element in the role of the horse in EFP is opposition reflex. Opposition reflex can be simply defined as a prey animal's automatic response to predator behavior: if the predator likes an idea or a course of action, it can't be good for the prey so it must be opposed. It is in observing, understanding and working with this trait in horses that much fertile therapeutic ground can be covered in EFP sessions.

This is particularly relevant when working with any teenager (the human embodiment of opposition

What Makes a Suitable EFP Horse?

By Shannon Knapp

In interviewing professionals in the equine-assisted activities and therapies field, there appears to be no consensus on what is a “suitable” EFP horse. Some had no specific criteria, while others had an extensive list of all the skills a horse must be able to perform to be considered. I’m interested in horses that offer a range of attitudes, reactivity and response time, or a range of Horsenalties™, as Parelli calls them.

First, I feel stallions are inappropriate in most situations for beginners. Second, I want to work with a horse who can self-regulate well or at least who can co-regulate with me easily, which is a horse who, when in doubt (i.e., when unable to self-regulate), looks to me for direction and an indication of the appropriate reaction to a given circumstance.

In the area of self-regulation, I look for attributes such as:

- a shorter flight line (the distance a horse will flee before turning around to reassess the danger)
- moderate reactivity to stimulus (neither too big nor too small a response)
- a desire/interest to connect with people, or a curiosity about humans

A lot of this behavior can be more easily understood in the Horsenality™ framework. Created by Linda Parelli, Horsenality™ can be seen as a simpler Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), with only four quadrants rather than the 16+ MBTI possibilities. Myers-Briggs is based on how people perceive the world and how they make decisions, and much of the same analysis is at work in Horsenality™, which represents the best of our ability to assess these things, not being horses ourselves.

The two main axes of Horsenality™ are introverted/extroverted—relatively self-explanatory—and left-brain/right-brain, which can also be seen as confident/unconfident. Hence, there are four core combinations to remember: left-brain introvert, left-brain extrovert, right-brain introvert and right-brain extrovert. Ideally all of these “personalities” will be present in a herd I’m working with doing EFP.

One of the greatest elements of EFP is that all horses have value, and all of the horse is welcome, mind, body and spirit—a great reflection of a philosophy for life.

To learn more about how to assess Horsenality™ and download a free assessment tool, see ParelliNaturalHorseTraining.com/horsenality-horses.

reflex!). They, like horses, are engaged in important developmental work when exercising opposition reflex in relation to the adults in their world. Also significant in this regard are youth with Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) and Conduct Disorder (CD).

However, one doesn't have to work with youth in order for this to be a significant part of the EFP process. A psychotherapist's participant load is full of examples of adults who engage in behavior that actively pushes away, almost as instinctual behavior, the very thing(s) they desire, to their detriment. Working with horses can give these participants the opportunity to experience how their opposition reflex operates.

A Different Agenda

Another very significant element the horse brings to EFP is what some call “clean listening.” Because they disregard all the distractions that often make up human communication (what kind of car you are driving, what kind of tennis shoes you wear, how your hair is cut, etc.), horses actually listen to us at a much different and often deeper level to the point where they “attune” to us. As Daniel Goleman describes attunement in his book *Social Intelligence* (2006), horses “listen with full receptivity,” without much of the baggage that humans bring so they hear us more clearly. This isn't always the case between an EFP participant and horse, but it occurs often enough to merit mention.

Of equal importance to what the horse does bring to a session is what the horse doesn't. Although many people speak of the horse being a clean slate, as having no agenda, that's not true in the strictest sense. Of course the horse has an agenda that is present all the time: survival. Horses' hierarchy of needs is most simply broken down as safety first (survival),

comfort next, then play or food, depending on the individual equine.

What the horse doesn't bring is what often is first and foremost for humans: What do you do for a living? Where do you live? Who are your people/your "tribe"? Horses don't care about any of that. They don't think about last year's ribbons or ribbons to come or about getting that new and improved special bedding for their stalls. They are not concerned with what humans are often overwhelmingly interested in and motivated by: praise, recognition and material possessions. Instead they care if you are safe to connect with, and everything else follows (or doesn't) from that underlying premise. This can be an incredible gift to humans who can no longer rely on familiar, and often dysfunctional, ways of relating but must explore more unfamiliar, and often more anxiety-provoking but growth promoting, ways to connect.

Facilitator and Participant Engagement

Of interest also is how facilitators engage with horses during EFP sessions. Any facilitator is at his or her best when responding to the needs of the participant(s) and the horse(s) in any given moment foremost, rather than being beholden to theoretical or methodological approaches. Facilitators move in and out of being 3D and being 2D with participants and horses. Briefly, 3D contact happens in the check-in, closing and processing portions of a given session and is the most likely time to see facilitators in a small circle with the participant or with any one of the

people involved in the session, perhaps petting a horse who has walked in to join that circle. What we call 2D contact involves getting out of the way (literally and figuratively) and allowing the participant and the horse to connect unhindered and unaided by the facilitators. Although always mindful of the needs of participants



Some people refer to the way horses hear us as "clean listening" because they disregard all the distractions that often make up human communication.

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and horses, including needs for safety and a safe place to learn and practice new behaviors, facilitators in EFP operate best when they are minimally involved in the relationship between participant and horse.

This leads to a brief overview of both the conscious and unconscious ways participants engage with horses in session. The conscious ways most often discussed include:

- live problem-solving or learning and practicing new behaviors in a

natural setting in the moment

- learning co-regulation of behaviors and emotions with the horse in order to learn self-regulation
- opportunities for feedback, as discussed earlier

Co- and self-regulation, specifically as it relates to trauma, may not always be the presenting problem,

but many participants have experienced some degree of trauma. Pat-Horenczyk, Rabinowitz, Rice and Tucker-Levin (page 64) state: "Dyadic treatment focuses on assisting the parent to become sufficiently emotionally regulated to both enable the child to co-regulate and then self-regulate emotionally as well as to think clearly enough to be able to autonomously self-regulate emotions as well as solve problems and achieve external goals." The suitable EFP horse then acts as a stand-in for the unavailable or uninterested parents in this dyadic process described above. (See "What Makes a Suitable EFP Horse?" on page 40).

Oxytocin and Entrainment

Several other aspects to consider in unconscious engagement include the effects of the hormone oxytocin and the process of entrainment. Oxytocin is released in all mammals in physical contact with one another. It has been linked broadly to our ability to make social connections, as well as to bonding and anxiety and fear reduction. (It is in this realm that there appears to be the single best support for the idea that horses actually get something out of the EFP relationship with humans.)



When selecting a horse for equine-facilitated psychotherapy, look for a horse with a shorter flight line (the distance a horse will flee before turning around to reassess the danger).

To learn more about oxytocin, read Meg Daley Olmert's book, *Made for Each Other: The Biology of the Human-Animal Bond*. Horses & Humans Research Foundation, www.horsesandhumans.org, is also funding a project by Dr. Andrea Beetz of Germany, who is investigating if human-horse interactions have a positive effect on difficult mother-child relationships through measurement of oxytocin levels. (For more information, see the HHRF Newsletter, Edition 1, 2011.)

Entrainment, as explained by Goleman in *Social Intelligence*, occurs “whenever one natural process entrains or oscillates in rhythm with another” (Goleman, 34). Some studies regarding the horse's electromagnetic field and the impact of this on humans within that field indicate that humans more quickly reach a state of coherence when in the presence of horses (Walters & Baldwin; see also Gehrke, “The Horse-Human Heart Connection,”

PATH Intl. Strides, Vol. 16, No. 2, pp. 20-23).

As Goleman says, “When waves are out of synch, they cancel each other; when they synchronize, they amplify” (Goleman, 34). Other studies demonstrate that horses also entrain to us as evidenced by an increased heart rate in horses when there is a similar heart rate increase in the human at the end of the lead rope or on the horse's back (Zacks). How the entrainment happens and who drives the entrainment is an opportunity for more study.

There is a great deal going on in EFP, and we've touched on two of the combinations of relationships of which to be aware in session—the horse-participant interaction and the horse-facilitator interaction—and looked at the predator-prey psychology as being a component to the impact of EFP. Another area to explore is the combination of horses-facilitators-participants, not to mention environment, which, as Tanya

Welsch-Bailey of Natural Connections reminds us, is always changing and always impacting our sessions. EFP is such a powerful field for further exploration, as well as personal growth, because it is so rich in both feel (during session and in anything we do with horses) and in thought (before and after session). It is this integration of thought, feeling and the senses that makes EFP such a robust treatment opportunity, able to make a difference for so many people.

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Shannon Knapp, the founder and president of Horse Sense of the Carolinas, Inc., and Horse Sense Business Sense, has worked with and taught horses and people for over 25 years. Shannon is EAGALA Advanced Certified, a Parelli Level 3 student and author of numerous resources for horse therapy and learning programs, including Horse Sense Business Sense. In addition, she is a graduate advisor for Prescott College's Equine Assisted Learning master's program and offers consulting services to those interested in starting their own programs. Currently Shannon and her husband, Richard, are developing programming to support horse professionals and mental health professionals with their horsemanship skills for EFP/EFL programs utilizing Parelli principles, practices and ideas. Portions of this article are from Shannon's latest book *More than a Mirror: Horses, Humans and Therapeutic Practices*.